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ABSTRACT

A study investigated university students' perceptions of the performance of peer evaluation groups in English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) writing instruction, and of their own performance within the group. Subjects were 45 Chinese freshmen in their first semester in the Mass Communications Department at a Taipei university (Taiwan), with 6 years of English instruction in high school. In groups of three, students responded to each other's first-draft compositions, read aloud by the writer. Communication was at first mostly in Chinese, then increasingly in English. In logs, students wrote about their contribution to the group, other members' contributions, and feelings about the group session. Log contents were analyzed for general and specific positive comments on language issues, content, pronunciation, and student participation in the group, and for negative comments on language-related and non-language-related issues. Results indicate that overall, students had a positive perception of how they and their peers performed in peer response sessions. Students had a more negative perception of their own participation than of others'. Grammar, word usage, and mechanics were primary concerns in the discussions, with content a secondary consideration. Most liked and felt they benefitted from the activities. Pedagogical implications of the findings are discussed, particularly concerning teacher expectations. Contains 32 references. (MSE)

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EFL University Students' Perceptions of Their Performance in Peer Response Sessions

by

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Abstract

Peer response groups are being used by some university teachers in Taiwan to facilitate students' revision during the writing process. However, very few students have had any experience in responding to their peers' writing before entering a university. They are very likely to have problems initially when learning to work in peer response sessions. Therefore knowledge about students' perceptions of their performance in these sessions and their feelings about these sessions is very important.

A study was conducted to investigate how a group of EFL university students perceived the way they worked in peer response groups in the beginning stage of their training. The research questions were: (1) How do students perceive their own performance in peer response sessions? (2) How do students perceive their peers' performance in peer response sessions? (3) How do students feel about peer response sessions in general? This study spanned one semester. The subjects were 45 students in a Freshman English Reading and Writing Course in a university in Taipei. The students were divided into 15 groups; each group attended three peer response sessions during the semester. After each session, the students wrote learning logs to record their perception of the groups' performance and their feelings about the session. The logs written after the first and second sessions were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

This study found that, overall, the students seemed to have a positive perception of the way they and their peers performed in peer response sessions. When evaluating their contribution to the groups, the students seemed to have a more negative perception of their own performance than that of their group members. In addition, they appeared to consider grammar, word usage, and mechanics as their primary concerns when responding to writing. In contrast, content seemed to be only their secondary concern. In the affective dimension, the majority of them liked these group activities or felt that they had benefited from them.

At the end of this paper, pedagogical implications are discussed in terms of the initial expectations teachers should have when training peer response groups. Research implications are also presented.

Introduction

Some teachers in Taiwan have begun using peer response to facilitate students' revision. Since most writing classes for non-English majors at universities in Taiwan have large enrollments, ranging from approximately 25 to 50 students in each class, teachers rarely have the time to write ample between-draft comments to facilitate revision. Therefore peer response can be useful. However, it may not work in some classes. Students' attitudes toward peer response may also vary. The purpose of this study is to examine Chinese EFL students' perceptions of their performance in peer response sessions in the initial stage of learning to work in peer response groups. It is hoped that this study will provide teachers with a better understanding of the learning processes of these groups.

Review of the Literature

Since the adoption of the process approach to teaching English composition in the 1980s, peer response has been used by many teachers in first-language (L1) and second- or foreign-language (L2) classrooms. (Hereafter research in the L2 context is indicated by "L2" in the citations). Many studies have proven that peer response improves writing (Gere & Stevens, 1985; Huang, 1994, L2; Nelson, 1989/1990, L2; Nystrand, 1986). It has also been found that peer response helps students develop the ability to diagnose problems in the text, to monitor their writing process, and to develop audience awareness (Bencich, 1989/1990; Herrington & Cadman, 1991; Urzua, 1987, L2). It also provides psychological support for students by creating a community of writers, encourages writing and revising, and promotes positive attitudes toward writing (Bencich, 1989/1990; Liner, 1984; Nelson and Murphy, 1992, L2).

However, some research shows that peer response fails to improve writing. Carter (1982) and Wunsch (1980/1981) noted that college students who received extensive practice in peer evaluation did not outperform those without such training. Some researchers have doubts about college students' ability to help their peers with revising (Pianko & Radzik, 1980; Ziv, 1983). Even if students learn what is wrong with their text from their peers, they might have difficulty transferring their peers' suggestions into effective revisions (Rubin, 1983).

As shown above, the efficacy of peer response as a way to develop writing skills is still debatable, in both the L1 and L2 situations. Furthermore, in the L2 context, there have been very few studies on whether peer response is effective for Chinese students. More research is needed.

With regard to students' attitudes towards peer response, research also shows mixed findings. Some studies indicate that

students have positive attitudes. For instance, in the L1 context, Bencich (1989/1990) found that, for 11th-graders, peers' opinions seemed to be more important than a grade, as evidenced by the influence of these opinions on writers' revisions. Involvement in a writing group was a pleasurable and beneficial social experience. David (1986) and Liner (1984) reported that high school and college peer response groups became a community of writers who developed closer relationships with their group members over time. In the L2 context, Mendonca and Johnson's (1994) ESL graduate students found peer response to be useful for revision.

However, research also reveals negative attitudes towards peer response. In the L1 context, Danis (1982), Ziv (1983), and Spear (1988) reported that some college students did not regard their peers as valid audiences. Danis (1982) showed that they thus failed to ask critical questions of their peers. Tebo-Messina's (1987/1988) college freshmen either had reservations about the value of the group or felt resentment towards it. Cross' (1993) adult writers did not perceive peer response as a way to improve writing and preferred to maintain control over their own writing. In the L2 context, some college ESL teachers and students are also worried about using peer response because of a lack of confidence in students' language ability (Allaei & Connor, 1990; Chaudron, 1984; Jacobs, 1987).

As discussed above, findings on L1 students' attitudes toward peer response have so far been mixed. With regard to L2 students, the few studies conducted to date seem to indicate that students are more negative toward peer response than their L1 counterparts.

Many studies have also looked into what students discuss during peer response sessions. In the L1 context, Jones (1977/1978) classified the foci of students' comments into content, structure, paragraph structure, sentence structure, diction, and mechanics (70% of the comments were devoted to sentence structure, diction, and mechanics). Danis' sophomores (1982) addressed content, mechanics, organization, and language (constituting 36%, 20%, 14%, and 29% of the talk, respectively). Danis (1980) found that college sophomores offered suggestions for revision on development, clarity and precision of language, mechanics, organization, and focus (in descending order of frequency). In the L2 context, Dreyer's (1992) ESL writers were particularly inclined to comment on content. The above studies show that students respond to writing on both the macro (e.g., content, structure) and micro levels (e.g., grammar, mechanics).

In conclusion, knowledge of students' perceptions of how their peer response groups function is valuable to teachers since these perceptions provide insights into the students' learning processes. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there has

been very little research on how Chinese EFL students perceive their performance in peer response sessions. Therefore research in this area is needed.

Research Design

The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What are students' perceptions of their performance in peer response sessions?

2. What are students' perceptions of their group members' performance in peer response sessions?

3. What are students' feelings towards peer response sessions in general?

Subjects

The subjects were 45 freshmen in their first semester in the Mass Communications Department at a university in Taipei. Prior to this study, the students had already studied six years of English in high school, but they had no experience with peer response. They were enrolled in the Freshman Reading and Writing course, which spanned two semesters. The students met twice a week for two hours each session. They were required to write three compositions during the first semester. At the time of this study, only the first two assignments had been completed.

Instructional Procedures

The instructor of this class was also the researcher. The students were divided into 15 self-selected groups, each consisting of three students; these remained intact throughout the first semester.

For the first assignment, the students wrote a story, and for the second, they wrote an essay about an urban problem in Taiwan. Guidelines on how to write were given in handouts. For each assignment, the students brought their first draft to class for a peer response session. Before the session began, each student gave a copy of their first draft to each of the other two group members. The guidelines for writing the first drafts were used as prompts for responding to writing. Each author read his/her draft twice. Afterwards, the listeners wrote their comments on their copy of the author's draft, which they then returned to the author for revision. The session for the first assignment lasted thirty minutes; the session for the second lasted forty minutes. In the first session, most students spoke in Chinese most of the time, with the exception of one or two groups. In the second session, approximately one-third of the students used English.

Data Collection Procedures

The students were asked to write a learning log immediately after each response session to answer the following questions:

1. State your contribution to the group. If you do not think you have contributed to the group, state why. Be concrete.

2. State your group members' contribution to the group. If you do not think they have made any contribution, explain why. Be concrete.

3. How do you feel about the group session? Why? How does the group activity affect the relationship among the members?

Out of the 45 students in this class, only 41 took part in both sessions. Therefore only 41 sets of logs were analyzed.

Results and Discussion

The discussion below will follow the order of the research questions.

Q1. Students' Perception of Their Own Contribution to the Group

The students' answers were first categorized as either positive or negative comments.

I. Positive comments

Positive comments indicated the students' feelings that they had indeed contributed to the group. These were subcategorized into general comments and specific comments.

A. General comments

Through their general comments, the students suggested that they had made efforts to participate in the peer response session. Most of these comments showed that the students offered opinions about their peers' writing but did not specify the aspect of the writing they addressed (e.g., grammar, content). (Words added in brackets here are explanations or interpretations offered by the researcher.) The following are two examples:

"I offer personal response."

"I provide ideas to make discussion interesting."

B. Specific comments

Specific comments were divided into the following five categories:

1. **Comments on grammar, word usage, and mechanics**

These comments showed that the students contributed to the group by offering helpful suggestions on grammar, word usage, and mechanics.

Examples are as follows:

"I find out my group members' flaws in punctuation and capitalizations."

"So I think sometimes I find some vocabularies for them."

2. **Comments on structure and style**

These comments indicated that the students offered help on the structural elements (e.g., organization, transition, paragraphing, length of the draft) and language style (e.g., clarity, conciseness) of a piece of writing. The following are two examples.

" I suggest one of our members to present her idea more clearly and in an organized manner."

"And I told them to use transitional words to connect their composition ideas. I advice them how to class their paragraph [how to paragraph]."

3. **Comments on content**

Comments on content showed that the students helped their peers by commenting on the ideas in the composition or the title of the composition. Examples are as follows:

"I give [suggest] two conclusions to another classmate to make her composition more rich, and colorful."

"Our articles don't mention enough solution methods about our topic. We suggest many ideas [to] each other."

4. **Comments on pronunciation**

These comments pointed out that the students contributed to the group by commenting on the pronunciation of their group members. For example:

"I found out the voice they prounce [pronounce] is incorrect. I told them how to prounce it."

5. **Comments regarding students' participatory role in the group**

These statements concerned the efforts made by the students to participate in the peer response sessions. Two examples are as follows:

"I am a leader of our group. I decide our turns and deal with all details."

"I encourage my group to speak in English."

II. **Negative comments**

Negative comments indicated the students' feelings of having failed to make a contribution to the group or having had difficulty in the discussion. Some of these comments, though, were vague; they failed to specify how or why the students felt negatively. Two examples are listed below:

"I'm not sure whether I contributed to the three-person group."

"I kept quiet. I don't know how to discuss the problems with my group."

Negative comments were further divided into two categories:

A. **Language-related comments**

Such comments concerned the students' lack of confidence in expressing themselves in English. For example:

"I am sometimes afraid of talking in English."

"My English speak is very bad . . . . We communicate in Chinese. I am not a speaker in my group."

B. **Non-language-related comments**

Such comments mentioned the cause of failures of the group or the students' dissatisfaction with the group but did not relate this to perceived difficulties in using English. Some comments mentioned that the group did not go well because the students were not prepared for the session (e.g., did not have their drafts ready). Others stated that the group failed because they lacked training in group interaction or knowledge about how to write. Some of the comments did not specify the nature of the difficulty. Examples are as follows:

"I did less [than others] to the group. I forgot to make up [write] a story for my group."

"I sometimes provide some wrong ideas and they tell me why I am wrong."

Table 1 shows the various types of comments written in response to Question 1. Apparently the students offered more positive (79%) than negative comments (21%), indicating highly favorable attitudes toward peer response. In addition, the students made far more positive comments in the second logs than in the first, perhaps because, by the second session, the students were more experienced with working in groups and were functioning better.

Table 1
Students' Comments on Their Own Contribution to the Group

	Log 1	Log 2	Total	%
Positive comments	**36**	**58**	**94**	**79%**
General comments	22	19	41	
Specific comments	14	39	53(100%)	
Grammar, word, mechanics	5	15	20 (38%)	
Structure and style	1	6	7 (13%)	
Content	2	12	14 (26%)	
Pronunciation	1	1	2 (8%)	
Participatory role	5	1	6 (11%)	
Negative comments	**21**	**4**	**25(100%)**	**21%**
Language-related	13	2	15 (66%)	
Non-language-related	8	2	10 (33%)	
Total	**57**	**62**	**119**	**100%**

Grammar, word usage, and mechanics seemed to be the students' major concern in both sessions. The high priority placed on the correctness of language may suggest that these EFL students considered error correction to be extremely important in revision, as has been shown in many other studies of L1 (Perl, 1979) and L2 writers (Chandrasegaran, 1986; Gaskill, 1986/1987). Content appeared to be the second most important element. The tendency to comment on content may be explained by the fact that in the second session the instructor requested that the students focus more on content than language correctness (realizing that many students were overly concerned with language in the first session). Another explanation is that content may be an area that is easier to respond to. This has been suggested by Danis' (1982) and Greene's (1988) studies of L1 writers as well as Dreyer's (1992) study of ESL writers, all of which indicated that students often focused on content. The data from this study also show that the students seemed to make fewer comments on other aspects, such as structure and style; their participatory role in the group; or the pronunciation of group members.

There appeared to be a tremendous decrease in the number of negative comments in the second session (Log 1, 21; Log 2, 4). Apparently, the students felt more positively about their performance by the second session, perhaps because their performance had improved with practice.

The data also indicate that in the first session there were far more language-related comments (13 out of 21, 62%) than non-language-related ones (8 out of 21, 38%), indicating that the students felt insecure about their English ability. The lack of practice in conversing in an L2 probably led them to feel very self-conscious about their performance. However, the number of language-related comments decreased dramatically from 13 to 2 in the second session, and there appeared to be no obvious difference in the number of language-related (n=2) and non-language-related comments (n=2) in this session. It is possible that by Session 2 the students had more practice in speaking (not only from their reading and writing classes but also from their conversation classes) and therefore were less self-conscious about their abilities in English.

Q2. Students' Perceptions of Their Peers' Contribution to the Group

The comments written in response to Question 2 were categorized in the same way as those in Question 1, except for the addition of a category called comments on general language proficiency. Comments in this category dealt with students' beliefs that their group members helped them to improve their English in general (including speaking, reading, and writing). The following are examples:

"My another member, Jockey Huo, he dares to speak aloud English. And he usually taught us how to speak good English."

"This way to learn English makes me interested in it and improves my writing and reading abilities."

Table 2 shows the number of comments in each category. The comments were overwhelmingly more positive (89%) than negative (11%) when the two sets of logs were combined. Apparently, the majority of the students regarded their peers' performance as very positive. This is quite similar to the way that they perceived their own performance. In addition, there was little difference in the number of positive comments between the first and second logs. The students' perceptions of their group members' contribution did not change much over time.

The data show that the most frequent type of specific comments were concerned with grammar, word usage, and mechanics (52%) when the two sets of logs were combined. This indicates that the students felt that their peers considered language

Table 2
Students' Comments on Their Peers' Contribution to the Group

	Log 1	Log 2	Total	%
Positive comments	**45**	**47**	**92**	**89%**
General comments	20	12	32	
Specific comments	25	35	60(100%)	
General language proficiency	7	0	7 (12%)	
Grammar, word, mechanics	10	21	31 (52%)	
Structure and style	2	3	5 (8%)	
Content	5	9	14 (23%)	
Pronunciation	0	1	1 (2%)	
Participatory role	1	1	2 (3%)	
Negative comments	**6**	**5**	**11(100%)**	**11%**
Language-related	1	2	3 (27%)	
Non-language-related	5	3	8 (73%)	
Total	**51**	**52**	**103**	**100%**

correctness to be the most important element to respond to. The second most frequent specific comments dealt with content (23%). This emphasis on language and content was also reflected in the students' perception of their own performance. The third most frequent comments (12%) were on general language proficiency. Some of the students believed that their group members helped them to improve their language ability, not only in writing but also in speaking and reading.

With regard to the negative comments, there was little difference in the number of comments between the two sessions (Log 1, 6; log 2, 5). It appeared that the students' feelings about their peers' performance did not change greatly over time. Since the two sessions spanned only one month, the level of the students' performance may not have changed much.

In addition, the negative comments written in response to Question 2 (n=11) were far outnumbered by those written in response to Question 1 (n=25). This tendency was especially clear in the first session: In the first logs, the students made only 6 comments concerning peers' performance, but they made 21 concerning their own performance. Thus, the students appeared to perceive their peers' performance less negatively than their own in the first session. This may indicate that, in the initial stage of learning to respond to others' writing, the students felt less confidence in their own performance than in that of their group members. This may have occurred because, having had little speaking practice in their high school English classes, the students were very self-conscious of their verbal skills. By the second session, with more practice in the groups, such

feelings appeared to subside.

The data also show that in Session 1, when the students discussed their peers' performance, they were less concerned with their peers' language problems than their own. In this session, only 1 of the 6 negative comments made about peers' performance were language-related, while 13 of the 21 comments about the students' own performance were thus related. The students seemed to be more aware of their own language problems in discussing writing than their peers'. Therefore, they recalled themselves making mistakes or experiencing more frustration. However, such a tendency did not appear to occur in the second session. Perhaps by this time the students had overcome some of their initial fear of speaking English and no longer felt more conscious of their language deficiency than that of their peers.

Q3. Students' Feelings About Peer Response Sessions in General

Responses to Question 3 were categorized as (1) comments indicating positive feelings and (2) comments indicating negative feelings. The former was further categorized as follows:

I. **Comments indicating positive feelings**

A. **Comments indicating general positive feelings**

Such statements expressed in a general way that the students liked peer response or thought it was beneficial to them. The majority of the comments indicated enjoyment of the sessions. Some of them described the group activities as effective; others showed the students' appreciation of how their group benefited them. For examples:

"It makes me interested in learning in English."

"I was very appreciative for their comments."

B. **Comments indicating enhancement of group relation**

These statements described the strengthening of group relation after the members participated in peer response sessions. The following are examples:

"When I offer my idea, my classmates are always happy to receive them. So, we get close relationship."

"And we found we have much more fun to talk with one another. The situation just like a family."

C. **Comments indicating enhancement of self-confidence**.

These comments suggested enhancement of the students'

confidence in their ability to produce effective comments or simply to speak English. A few comments indicated that working in small groups reduced their fear of speaking. The following are two examples:

"I find that after my feedback I get more confidence and the sence [sense] of complishment [accomplishment]."

"I can also learn how to talk with others in English and reduce my afraid sense [sense of fear]."

II. **Comments indicating negative feelings**

These comments suggested negative sentiments about the peer response sessions. Half of these comments showed the students' concern about their own or their group members' inability to provide effective comments. Other concerns were: the students' realization of the poor quality of their own writing; their fear of offending others when responding to writing; anger at being corrected; anxiety over the possibility of becoming too dependent on peer feedback; and feeling bored during the group activities. Some examples are as follows:

"I am afraid my idea is wrong and can't command about [make comments on peers' writing]."

"Sometimes I feel unhappy because they didn't give me any suggestion."

"When I tell them our [my] idea about their article, I'm sometimes so afraid of making them angry that I sometimes don't tell them our [my] ideas. But I think it is not right."

Table 3 shows the number of comments in each category. There were clearly more positive (88%) than negative comments (12%). Fifty-eight percent of the positive comments suggested that the students liked peer response in general. Thirty-three percent of the comments suggested that the group activities brought the students closer to each other. Such a positive effect has also been reported by David (1986) and Liner (1984). In addition, in the second session there was an increase in the number of such positive comments. It appeared that as the students continued to collaborate on their writing, they developed a closer relationship together. Furthermore, 10% of the positive comments in the two sessions suggested that the students gained self-confidence in their ability to offer helpful comments to the group or even just to talk in English. Some of these comments said that the psychological support provided by the group reduced their fear of speaking a foreign language.

Table 3
Students' Comments on Their Feelings about the Group in General

	Log 1	Log 2	Total	%
Positive feelings	**55**	**49**	**104(100%)**	**88%**
General positive feelings	37	23	60 (58%)	
Enhancement of group relation	14	20	34 (33%)	
Enhancement of confidence	4	6	10 (10%)	
Negative feelings	**5**	**9**	**14**	**12%**
Total	**60**	**58**	**118**	**100%**

Therefore, for some students the support from the group seemed to have enhanced learning. Such a claim has been made by many scholars who advocate cooperative learning (Sharon, 1980)

A small percentage (12%) of the number of comments made in the two sessions indicated negative sentiments toward the group activities. The majority of tnese comments showed that the students remained unconvinced of their own or their group members' ability to give effective feedback to facilitate revision. Such a distrust of peers' ability has been reported in a few studies of L2 writers, e.g., Jacobs' (1987) study of EFL university students and Mendonca and Johnson's (1994) study of ESL graduate students. This kind of negative attitude is not surprising since the students were writing in a language that they were still struggling with. A few other negative comments indicated the students' discomfort about sharing their writing with the group. Since the students had little confidence in their writing, it is natural that they might feel such discomfort.

Conclusions, Implications, and Limitations

The following conclusions are drawn from this study.

1. Overall, the students seemed to have positive perceptions of the way they and their group members performed in the peer response sessions. Most of them felt that there had been mutual contributions.

2. When students and their peers responded to writing, they commented most frequently on grammar, word usage, and mechanics. The second most frequently discussed aspect was content. Other areas that received less attention were: the form and style of the writing; the students' participatory role in the group; and students' English pronunciation.

3. In the initial stage of learning to work in peer

response groups, the students appeared to have a more negative perception of their own performance than that of their group members. However, this tendency seemed to disappear after a month.

4. When reporting their failure to contribute to the groups in the first session, the students were also more conscious of their own inability to express themselves in English than that of their peers. Such a tendency also seemed to disappear after a month.

5. In the affective dimension, the students had overall positive opinions of peer response. The majority of the comments showed that the students liked the group activities or felt that they had benefited from them. Many students sensed that the activities had established closer group relations. Some even indicated that the activities had made them confident in their ability to provide effective comments on others' writing or just to speak English.

6. A small number of comments showed that the students were concerned with their inability to speak English in peer response sessions. Other comments illustrated the students' anxiety about their group members' ability to provide effective feedback on revision, since they all were still having difficulty in writing and critiquing writing.

A few pedagogical implications can be drawn from this study.

1. Most of the students in this study had positive perceptions of their own and their peers' performance in peer response sessions. Since students are receptive to this teaching method, teachers can use it to help students develop revision skills.

2. The students in this study appeared to consider language correctness to be the most important aspect to respond to in peer response sessions. However, they did not often discuss structure, organization, and style. Generally speaking, this strategy is what characterizes unskilled writers, who consider revision as micro-level error correction rather than macro-level changes in content, structure, organization, etc. Students need to learn to respond to writing more globally.

3. The majority of students in this study appreciated peer response and believed in its benefit. Therefore, teachers can use peer response to build a supportive community for students who feel insecure about writing in a foreign language. Such a community will also enhance students' confidence in their ability to critique writing and communicate in the L2, which in turn will motivate them to learn.

4. **This study shows that the students perceived their own performance in the groups more negatively than that of their peers.** They were also more conscious of their own inability to speak English than that of their peers. Apparently, some students do feel insecure about their ability to work in peer response groups. Therefore, the teacher should encourage the students constantly and provide extensive modeling on how to respond to texts.

This study has its limitation in that it was based on data collected from learning logs which were in the form of responses to questionnaires. It is suspected that the students may have given short answers simply to finish what the researcher required them to do. Data obtained in this manner may not have as much detail as those collected by other means, such as in-depth interviews.

In the EFL context, very few studies have been conducted on the nature of Chinese students' interaction in peer response groups and the way that students use peer feedback in revision. A study on how they perceive peer response would be of even greater value if it were accompanied by investigation of what students actually do in peer response sessions and how they react to peer comments on revision. Studies of an ethnographic nature may be particularly useful in exploring the issue of peer response groups.

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